Unit .15

Session .06

God Pictures a Future Hope

Scripture

Ezekiel 37:1-6, 16-17, 20-28

1 The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by his Spirit and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. **2** He led me all around them. There were a great many of them on the surface of the valley, and they were very dry. **3** Then he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I replied, "Lord God, only you know." **4** He said to me, "Prophesy concerning these bones and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! **5** This is what the Lord God says to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you will live. **6** I will put tendons on you, make flesh grow on you, and cover you with skin. I will put breath in you so that you come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord." ... **16** "Son of man, take a single stick and write on it: Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him. Then take another stick and write on it: Belonging to Joseph—the stick of Ephraim—and all the house of Israel associated with him. **17** Then join them together into a single stick so that they become one in your hand. ... **20** "When the sticks you have written on are in your hand and in full view of the people, **21** tell them, 'This is what the Lord God says: I am going to take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them into their own land. **22** I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel, and one king will rule over all of them. They will no longer be two nations and will no longer be divided into two kingdoms. **23** They will not defile themselves anymore with their idols, their abhorrent things, and all their transgressions. I will save them from all their apostasies by which they sinned, and I will cleanse them. Then they will be my people, and I will be their God. **24** My servant David will be king over them, and there will be one shepherd for all of them. They will follow my ordinances, and keep my statutes and obey them. **25** "'They will live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They will live in it forever with their children and grandchildren, and my servant David will be their prince forever. **26** I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be a permanent covenant with them. I will establish and multiply them and will set my sanctuary among them forever. **27** My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. **28** When my sanctuary is among them forever, the nations will know that I, the Lord, sanctify Israel.'"

Intro Options

Main Point:
God's Word is capable of bringing life where there is none.

Option 1

A major Hollywood studio feels like the time is right to make a grand, epic fantasy story. They have the basics, but they want your youth group to fill in the blanks in the story. Tell them to form groups, or they can work solo if they prefer. Once their groups are formed, their job is to prepare a pitch for their story. The outline should be as follows: "a great kingdom has run itself into the ground; terrible rebellion brought about the near-decimation of the kingdom. It's now in a horrific position, its people scattered, its cities ruined, its government apparently gone. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, the king returns to rebuild the fallen kingdom…" The rest of the story is the students'. They should prepare some kind of pitch: they could storyboard it, they could make a brief outline, they could make a trailer-skit; whatever the case, they should show how the king restores the kingdom. Let them prepare and then show what they make. See how they choose to do it. Does the king waylay the bad guys through violence? Does the king woo his people? Does the king employ diplomacy? Once they've shared their ideas, see how they compare to what God promises to do in Ezekiel. By the end of the lesson, you might ask them which story they like better. Why?

Option 2

Divide your students into three groups. Tell your students to imagine they are all counselors in a made-up country's government. Unfortunately, this made-up country is experiencing terrible trauma. Most of the citizens are dead; the few that are alive have scattered to the wind and divided into factions; almost all the people have rebelled against their government. Each group has been tasked with solving one of these three problems: assign the first group the task of somehow renewing the population after this mass death; the second group is to figure out how to re-unite the fractioned citizens; the final group is somehow to restore the people's faith in the government. Give the groups some time to come up with a plan for their particular problem, then let them share them. See what kind of ideas they came up with. Do any of them come close to the solutions God will show Ezekiel (respectively, he will raise his people from the dead by the power of his word; he will unite them with their love for one King; he will dwell among them in order to win them)? Lead into the lesson by saying that Israel was in the same state, but God showed Ezekiel his solutions. How is God's solution better than anything human beings could think of or do?

TEACHING PLAN

As we approach the final session in this volume, we encounter a scene from the prophet Ezekiel that is full of both despair and hope. The Lord brought His prophet to a valley full of dry bones to show him the hopelessness of life in exile, but also to reveal the power of God to raise the dead and restore His people. The vision gave hope to the people in Ezekiel's day that God would bring them back to their land. It also gives us hope by reminding us the Word of God has resurrection power, which makes us alive and restores our relationship to God.

Read Ezekiel 37:1-6.

The vision opens with Ezekiel being transported by the Spirit of the Lord to a valley filled with dry, bleached bones. The number of bones was vast, enough to constitute an entire army (v. 10). The Lord led him back and forth among the scattered bones to see that no life or flesh existed in or upon them.

God made His point clear in verse 11: The bones littering the valley were representative of the whole house of Israel, and she was dead. The people of Israel considered themselves beyond resuscitation as a nation. Gone was any hope of God's people returning to life and to their homeland. For too long they had rejected the Lord and His messengers, and as time passed, their hearts became increasingly hardened. The people's rebellion ultimately led to God punishing them by means of exile. In short, their disregard for God's word, as preached by the prophets, led to their death.

- **How does a rejection of God's Word lead to death?**

After Ezekiel observed the valley's dry bones, God asked him if those bones could live. Ezekiel knew the impossible was possible with God. The difference in this scenario was that God would have to resuscitate dry bones instead of corpses shortly after death. But rather than diminish God, Ezekiel replied in submission to the sovereign knowledge and power of God.

God then channeled His divine power through Ezekiel. The Lord commanded the prophet to prophesy to the bones. As Ezekiel spoke the promise of life, the bones began to rattle, and then they were joined by tendons and covered with flesh (vv. 7-8). The Lord then completed the resurrection process by breathing life into the lifeless bodies (v. 10).

Here we must recognize the power of God's word to bring life. The idea of preaching to dry bones seems like a waste of time. Can you remember the last time a skeleton listened to you? Yet Ezekiel spoke the word of God, and it brought life to dry bones. What a beautiful reminder that God's Word has the power to bring restoration to all aspects of life. There is no hidden crevice in our lives that God's Word cannot reach and redeem. In our weaker moments, we may doubt God's power to make a situation or relationship whole again. We may question whether God could change a hardened heart. But we would be wrong in our doubt because a God who can raise dry bones to life can work miracles in other aspects of our lives as well.

- **How have you seen God's Word bring restoration to your life or to the life of someone you know?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God's Word is capable of bringing life where there is none.

Ezekiel 37

1. Ezekiel, the son of a priest, was part of the deportation of Judeans in 597 BC, the second of three waves of Judeans deported to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:10-17). He was approximately twenty-five years old at the time. Even though he had the same role as Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, Ezekiel's ministry was unique among the Old Testament prophets in that it took place entirely in Babylon. Similar to Jeremiah, Ezekiel faced incredible discouragement in that he proclaimed God's message with little positive response. Despite the people's present rebellion and circumstances, God promised them a future hope of restoration. This promise came in the form of a vision received by Ezekiel.

5-6. As New Testament Christians, we cannot read these verses without instinctively jumping ahead to the idea of bodily resurrection, specifically Jesus' resurrection. There is no question that the concept of bodily resurrection was present in the mind of Ezekiel. In the context of this vision, however, the resurrection imagery has to do with God's restoring, both physically and spiritually, a specific people.

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 104, DDG)

Christ as King

God has always been King over His creation, whether in heaven or on earth. Yet some of His creatures in both realms have rebelled against Him, leaving destruction in their wake. To restore His broken world, God promised a King who would deliver His people and restore all of creation. The promise of a coming King finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ and looks forward to its perfection when Jesus returns for His bride, the church.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Ezekiel 37:16-17, 20-22.

Ezekiel's vision centered on the nation's restoration. Ezekiel was commanded by God to perform a symbolic act involving two sticks, one representing Judah, the Southern Kingdom, and the other representing Ephraim, the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It is worth noting that each inscription mentioned Israel, implying that the two kingdoms were always one people. Ezekiel joined the sticks together to create the appearance of one single stick, symbolizing God's plan to reunify the two kingdoms following their split after Solomon's death (1 Kings 12). The Lord desired to see the tribes of Israel reconciled and unified under one king, a reality that would come to pass in His timing and by His doing.

- **What role do God's people have in living in unity with one another?**

God told His people that His plan for restoration extended beyond those involved in the Babylonian captivity; it included the Israelites throughout the nations where they had been scattered, bringing them all back to their homeland. This greater gathering speaks of a future reality that goes beyond the returns from exile that happened in the days of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. God also reiterated His commitment to unite His people forever under one future king.

How Ezekiel interpreted this message we cannot fully know, but from our present-day vantage point, we clearly see that the vision finds its fulfillment in the promised Messiah—Jesus Christ. From a political standpoint, Israel would never again be ruled by a king. This historical fact lends greater credit to the truth that God's people would only find their full restoration in Jesus. Ezekiel knew Israel's redemption would not find its full consummation while still under Old Testament law. Rather, the prophet trusted in a day when Israel would be unified under a new covenant with new hearts (Ezek. 36:24-27; Jer. 31:31-34). This new covenant that would purify them from sin and unify them into one kingdom would be inaugurated by King Jesus.

- **What messages should unity among God's people communicate to the world?**

Read Ezekiel 37:23-28.

Ezekiel did not know the specific details surrounding the messianic king's arrival, but as verses 23-24 suggest, he knew the coming of this king would correspond with the permanent cleansing of the people from sin. God was going to place over Israel a future Davidic king, and under this king, God's people would turn from their idolatry, be saved from their apostasies, and experience spiritual cleansing like never before. Furthermore, this king would lead them to obey the word of the Lord.

God's people would soon experience a measure of renewal in the land with a rebuilt temple, yet Israel's dry bones would not begin to experience the fullness of life until Christ ushered in the new covenant with His blood shed on the cross for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:27-28).

- **How is Jesus' cleansing power greater than the cleansing power offered through the Old Testament sacrificial system?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God's Word is capable of bringing life where there is none.

Ezekiel 37

23-28. The chapter concludes with God proclaiming a permanent covenant with His people. Five times in verses 25-28 we find the Hebrew for "forever" or "permanent." God promised to restore the people to their land forever and to construct a sanctuary that would last forever. God also promised to dwell among the people permanently—something the people only experienced intermittently in the Old Testament.

When Jesus came, He referred to His body as the temple that would be built up (John 2:19-22), a permanent dwelling of the Lord as He is God the Son. Furthermore, the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit to dwell permanently in those who believe in Christ. Both individually and corporately, believers become the permanent dwelling place of the Lord, for the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16-18).

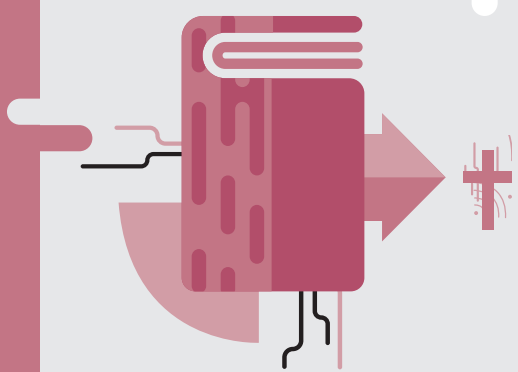
It is clear in our modern eyes that the promises spoken of by Ezekiel did not find their complete fulfillment in the people's return from Babylon. Old Testament prophecies often had a short-term, limited fulfillment followed by a long-term, complete fulfillment. As it relates to Ezekiel's vision, the return to Jerusalem after the exile was only a foreshadowing of the full restoration God's people would experience through the promised King, Jesus Christ. And with His coming, the gospel is now shared among the nations that they may believe and find unity as one people of God led by the one King of God.

Activity

Split your students into three groups. Give each group lots of paper, a stapler, and drawing utensils (one stapler will be enough if the groups can share). Tell the students to imagine the church is going on a mission trip to a non-English-speaking people group. The church wants to teach this lesson about God predicting a future for his people. The church has someone who can speak the target language and will do the talking for the lesson. They want your youth group to put on a puppet show to augment the explanation. Each group is assigned one of the three major points (God giving life through his word; God uniting the peoples under one king; God dwelling among his once-rebellious people). Each group should make hand puppets for their particular section by drawing on a sheet of paper and then stapling it to another sheet on three edges (leave one edge unstapled for the puppeteer's hand). Give them some time and see what kinds of puppets they draw. Have them explain how they'll use these puppets (you could even do a dry run of the puppet show!) to see their learning for the lesson.

(p. 106, DDG) Christ Connection

God gave Ezekiel a vision of the power of God to bring life out of death and to restore a broken and scattered people. Ezekiel's vision was fulfilled ultimately in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus is Immanuel—God with us—the King who gives life and rules over a unified people from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev. 7:9).



GOD PICTURES A FUTURE HOPE

Ezekiel 37:1–6, 16–17, 20–28

GOD PICTURES A FUTURE HOPE

God's Word is capable of bringing life where there is none.

JESUS CONNECTION

God gave Ezekiel a vision of God's promise to bring life out of death and to restore His broken and scattered people. Ezekiel's vision was fulfilled through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the King who gives life and will rule over a unified people from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev. 7:9).

LIFEWISE QUALITY

HOPE – Expecting God will do what is best in every situation.

HEAD

In today's Bible passage, we read about a scene from the prophet Ezekiel that is full of both despair and hope. What did God show Ezekiel to represent despair?

What good news did God deliver to Ezekiel to give him hope?

HEART

Had God rescued the Israelites from seemingly impossible situations in the past? If so, why did they doubt God in this situation?

When we find ourselves in impossible situations, it's easy to focus on the circumstances. And God doesn't always change our circumstances. However, He always offers us hope. Hope means we step back and get the bigger picture of who God is and what He might be doing.

Based on God's words to Ezekiel, what can we expect God can and will do even when our situation doesn't change?

HANDS

The Lord brought His prophet to a valley full of dry bones to show him the hopelessness of life in exile, but also to reveal the power of God to raise the dead and restore His people. The vision gave hope to the people in Ezekiel's day that God would bring them back to their land.

In order to help a friend, relative or someone you know have hope in a difficult situation, read or share today's story with them. Give them your thoughts on what you know about "expecting," trusting or believing God will do what is best in every situation.